



ALABAMA AUDUBON

Simple Singers:

Simple singers are those birds that sing songs composed of very few notes, which vary little if at all in pitch or speed, and they present those notes slowly enough that you may count them as they occur.

Prothonotary warbler – The simplest of simple songs, this bird does a single, sibilant, note. It repeats that note 3-5 times, but still...one note on one pitch. The bird says; “Sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet.” The end. The notes are more legato than staccato, and mid-range; neither high nor low. Find this bird in swamps or near slow-moving streams. It arrives in North Alabama by the first full week of April, breeds here, and is largely silent by mid-June until departing for the southern hemisphere in early Fall.

Ovenbird – Perhaps the only song that could or should ever be confused with the Prothonotary warbler’s, the Ovenbird sings a series of straightforward one- or two-note phrases. It differs from the Prothonotary in two major ways: one is location – Ovenbirds nest on or near the ground, and they spend most of their time very low. So listen for them singing from the forest floor in large, mature, upland forests – not swamps and marshes. And – and this is significant – Ovenbirds sing in a crescendo – the song gets louder and louder as it proceeds. So what you should hear sounds like; “teach, teach, teach, TEACH, TEACH, TEACH TEACH. Or; “teach-er, teach-er, TEACH-ER, TEACH-ER;” etc. It’s a neat effect. Look for the birds in North Alabama forests, and/or higher elevations beginning in Mid-April.

Prairie warbler – A lovely little early spring migrant, common in early second-growth and old fields throughout the state, Prairie warblers sing a buzzy series of evenly spaced notes. And the notes are chromatic; which is to say, they form an ascending scale. Listen as they slide up the scale to the point they seem to become inaudible to the human ear: “Zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee...”

Field sparrow – An uncommon permanent resident of old fields and brushy edges throughout the state, the song can only be confused with the Prairie warbler’s. But the differences are significant. Field sparrows’ songs are never buzzy. They are sung with liquid notes. And the song accelerates as it proceeds. The best mnemonic device I can offer is to imagine dropping a ping-pong ball on a table from a few feet of height. As the ball bounces, it makes a sound, and with each rebound the height is less and the sounds are closer together. And then imagine that you stop the ball with a paddle. That’s the way the song ends – as though it’s been stifled. “Tew...Tew...tew..tew..tew.tew.tewtewtewtewtewtew.

Tufted titmouse – A common permanent resident, the titmouse is one of those Songs You Must Learn. Listen for a flutey, two-noted song; “Pe-ter,-Pe-ter, Pe-ter, Pe-ter,” which, though most prevalent in late Winter-mid Spring, may be heard throughout the year. The song is clear, generally unhurried, and lack an accent on either note. And each of the two notes of the song is on the same pitch.

Northern cardinal – Common and widespread in the under- and mid-stories all year long throughout the state, the cardinal is a prolific and energetic singer. Another bird with a clear, “sung” vocalization, the

cardinal's typical two-noted song can only be confused with that of the Titmouse. Tell them apart by two factors: first, the cardinal generally begins the song with a down-slurred whistled note, and second, the accent is typically on the second – and higher-pitched – note of the two-note phrases. So you hear; “Phewww...bird-Dee, bird-DEE, bird-DEE.”

Carolina wren – Three notes. Remember that. Just three. The song may sound a bit rushed, but if you pay attention, it's just three notes, repeated endlessly. And there's a million mnemonics for the song: “Tea-ket-tle, tea-ket-tle, tea-ket-tle;” “Ja-pete-ter, ja-pete-ter, ja-pete-ter;” or my personal favorite; “Chee-bur-ger, chee-bur-ger, chee-bur-ger.” It doesn't matter; it's just three notes. It doesn't rise or fall in pitch; it doesn't speed up or slow down. This is another common, year-round bird that's highly vocal, so you'll have ample opportunity to practice on this one.

Common yellowthroat – And just like that, we entered into a little song “family” – the Carolina wren-type singers. And there's only a few, but they can be confusing. The easier one of this small group to distinguish is the yellowthroat, which is a fairly common breeder in wet areas, in early second-growth, and in old fields throughout the state. It's a fairly early spring migrant, lingering through the winter in very small numbers in the northern half of the state, and in far greater numbers nearer the Gulf coast. This song superficially resembles the Carolina wren's, but it consists of FOUR notes, not three; and it's delivered as though the bird is on a roller-coaster, with the notes rising and falling, speeding up and slowing down. There is generally an accent on the second of the four notes. So...listen for; “ter-WITCH-a-tee,” “ter-WITCH-a-tee,” “ ter-WITCH-a-tee...”

Kentucky warbler – A mid-spring migrant and local breeder in hilly forested tracts with dense undergrowth, KY warblers sound a lot like a Carolina wren, but listen carefully and you notice that there's really only two notes to the song. It's a rushed, somewhat metallic gallop; “Burr-ree,” “burr-ree,” “burr-ree...” Listen very carefully and you may also pick up a slight trill as the transition between the two syllables of the song occurs.